



CURT KIPP

Grace Dinsdale has a passion not just for plants, but the environment, as evidenced by the restoration project taking place on her property near the Tualatin River. She is working with state officials to preserve salmon habitat.

A perennial powerhouse

GRACE DINSDALE'S VISION

TRANSFORMS THE FAMILY

DAIRY FARM INTO

BLOOMING NURSERY, WHICH

'SPECIALIZES IN VARIETY'

By Jim LeMonds

When Grace Dinsdale says that Blooming Nursery is her dream, she's not kidding.

On a trip to Mexico at age 24, she came down with a severe head cold that left her in what she describes as "an altered state." That night, the nursery was the focus of her dreams. When she awoke, she immediately began putting a plan on paper.

"Things aren't always rational," Dinsdale said. "But it's worked out well so far."

Founder and president of the sprawling 130-acre nursery in Cornelius, Dinsdale has become one of the leading growers of perennials in the Pacific Northwest. Blooming produces more than 2,000 plant varieties and ships approximately 4 million plants annually.

Life on the family farm

Blooming Nursery is located on the dairy farm where Grace Dinsdale and her nine siblings were raised. Her parents purchased the farm in 1953 and moved the family to Oregon from Tennessee.

"We milked up to 300 cows," Dinsdale said. "My brothers and sisters and I all worked very hard. We were driving tractors by the time we were 6."

While Grace was finishing her college education, her mother began renting the farm to neigh-

bors. "When my mother announced she was planning to sell, I had a strong emotional reaction but lacked the means to do anything about it," Dinsdale said.

After she had the dream in Mexico, Grace spent 10 years trying to attain the cash flow that would make the dream a reality. In 1981, she took the first step by establishing the nursery on a small corner of the farm.

Each of the 10 siblings had been given a 4.9 percent share of the family farm. Their mother retained the controlling 51 percent. During the early '90s, she began to purchase the shares held by her mother and siblings, finally gaining full ownership of the farm in 2002.

The farm has changed, but Grace has salvaged pieces of her past. She completely renovated the family home and moved it to the south end of the property. The barn is used for the soil plant and transplanting center; an

26 ►

addition to the structure serves as the company's office.

The early years

When Grace founded Blooming Nursery in 1981, it was essentially a one-woman operation. She briefly considered continuing the family's farming tradition, but it wasn't economically feasible. "I could start a nursery with limited capital," she said. "Farming would have required a lot more."

She had earned degrees in psychology from Portland State University and botany from Oregon State University, but neither was found to be particularly helpful. She was armed with a hickory-tough work ethic and a small loan given grudgingly by a local bank, but not much more.

"I'd taken one or two horticulture classes," Dinsdale said, "but I had virtually no training when it came to raising plants. I really didn't know what I was doing that first winter."

One day when Grace stopped by Anderson Die and Manufacturing in Portland to purchase some pots, Bobbie Anderson referred her to Janet Starnes, owner of Janet Starnes Nursery in Molalla, Ore. Dinsdale considered Starnes the best grower of perennials in the area.

"Grace showed up on my doorstep with a beautiful *Aubrieta*," Starnes recalls. "She was nearly in tears. A local nurseryman had told her that her plants were 'overblown junk'."

Starnes encouraged Dinsdale to market her plants and to charge whatever she thought was a fair price. "I told her to stand her ground," Starnes said, "and she's been standing it ever since. Today, the tables are turned – I go to Grace for advice."

Dinsdale said that Blooming's growth has been gradual and steady; she couldn't point to a particular year where sales skyrocketed. However, a visit from the Perennial Plant Association during the late 1980s remains a high-water mark in her professional life.

"A group of about 450 perennial growers and designers came to Blooming," Dinsdale said. "They were so excited about our plants that they stayed way past when they were scheduled to leave. Their enthusiasm was a big shot in the arm in terms of validating what I was doing."

Blooming Nursery

Dinsdale realized early on that perennials were in high demand.

"People could only find them in mail-order catalogs," she said. "I decided to specialize in perennials, but I also decided to specialize in variety."

Each year, Blooming upgrades its inventory by discontinuing approximately 100 varieties and cultivars and adding about 200 to its sizable offering of more than 2,000 types of perennials. The nursery excels at producing plants that prefer a drier, Mediterranean climate, including lavender, rosemary, *Euphorbia*, *Cistus*, and *Ceanothus*.

Dinsdale said that consumer demand for new perennial varieties has motivated growers to experiment, but the rush to get new products onto the market has drawbacks. In some instances, plants released while still in the experimental stages have been a bust.

"Product trials are essential," Dinsdale said, "because when things don't pan out, buyers may mistakenly blame themselves for being poor gardeners and think they're wasting their money."

Dinsdale has high standards where quality is concerned. She shuns big-box stores and sells only to independent retailers and landscapers.

"Big-box stores tell you what they'll pay you, and that limits how you can grow plants," Dinsdale said. "When you're under that kind of pressure to rush plants to market, you can't possibly guarantee quality."

Blooming focuses on root growth, and that requires cooler temperatures and additional time.

"Plants that are grown quickly look beautiful on top," Dinsdale said,

"but they'll deteriorate in harsher conditions. That's the downside of relying exclusively on greenhouse growing to produce plants quickly."

Blooming has more than 200,000 square feet of greenhouse and cold-frame space. Plants are typically started in the greenhouse and then moved to the cold frames, where they develop their root systems and acclimate to a broader temperature range. The end result is resilient plants with a high survival rate.

Dinsdale sells finished containers 3.5 inches and larger west of the Rockies under the Blooming Advantage™ name. Liners and bareroots are sold throughout the U.S. and Canada.

A reputation for quality, tenacity, and sustainability

Kith Snitchler, general manager at Bethany Nursery in Portland, Ore., worked for Dinsdale in 2005. "Grace produces the nicest perennials in this area," he said. "In fact, her product is one of the best in the entire industry."

Snitchler cited Blooming's unfailing attention to detail as a key to its success. "The plants undergo what is virtually assembly-line inspection to make sure that they are clean and completely filled out before they're shipped."

The company's commitment to sustainable practices and "non-traditional" ways of raising perennials also left Snitchler impressed. "Grace is always investigating methods that can be used to lessen the impact of pesticides and fertilizers."

Heather Leyrer, owner of Horticultural Portraits in Tigard, Ore., admires what Dinsdale had accomplished in an industry typically dominated by men.

"Historically, most women have been involved in the nursery business only as part of a partnership with their spouse," Leyrer said. "Grace has accomplished all of this on her own and is far ahead of her time in this

regard. What she's done takes drive and foresight."

Weather, rising costs pose challenges

Although the Tualatin Valley is a wonderful place to raise plants, the lack of a significant population means that product must be shipped, and with fuel costs rising, the miles between grower and client are increasingly important.

Blooming recently installed improved weather-stripping and upgraded to more efficient boilers. Several greenhouses are equipped with state-of-the-art, ebb-and-flood watering systems, which save water and reduce costs.

"I certainly don't begrudge the increase in wages," she said of the rising payroll for her 75 employees. "In fact, I support it. It's necessary in order for people to make a living. But one

way or another, the labor and energy costs will eventually be reflected in the prices of our products."

But even with the uncertainty surrounding today's economy, the weather is the most significant variable as far as Grace is concerned.

"That's always the number one challenge," she said. "We have a 13-week window from March 1 until just after Memorial Day. If we have good weather during those 13 weeks, we do well. If the weather isn't good, people just don't buy plants."

Sister company produces plants for green roofs

Grace is also involved in a company called GreenFeathers Inc., which supplies plants for living roof systems. Benefits include noise reduction, reduced maintenance costs, improved stormwater detention, and significant

energy savings. The living roof systems are typically used atop multi-story buildings in urban settings.

"We've always had a strong environmental focus," Dinsdale said.

Although she hasn't pursued the idea, she believes Blooming may be able to attain sustainable practice certification in the future.

In the meantime, she is committed to producing the same quality and variety that have earned her a reputation as an innovator among Northwest nursery growers.

"Some of the things we grow don't sell all that well," Dinsdale said. "But I love plants, and I love to experiment with them." ☺

Jim LeMonds is a freelance writer based in Castle Rock, Wash. More information about him is available at www.writetokenorthwest.com



GreenFeathers
Living Roof Plants and Systems